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ABSTRACT

Self-concept must be viewed from the broader context of total organismic functioning. The human organism, functions in ways which support its own survival, maintenance, and growth. As one aspect of the total organismic functioning, self concept also may be thought of as being formed by processes which serve to support survival, maintenance, and growth. In the development of self concept, perceptions are sought and assimilated which (1) are consistent with past data; (2) appear to be congruent with environmental input; (3) support safety, exploration, and achievement of additional faculties; and (4) minimize apparently fruitless, frustrating, or disappointing interactions. In other words, they are selected to maximize the functioning of the individual within a complex matrix of external and internal variables. Given a sequence of interaction between the individual and the environment over time, self-concept will prgress developmentally toward increasing complexity and adequacy. As an integral part of the total human system, therefore, conceptions about self will follow principles of consistency, enhancement of organismic well-being, and increased cognitive complexity. (Author)

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Speculations on Self-Concept in Adolescents as Consistency Rules

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Self concept is a matrix of self referent observations which reflect the specific content and general structure of the individual's knowledge of self. Self concept is but one among many classes of concepts the individual holds and the concepts held range widely in content and scope. Yet the act of conceptualizing is but one among a number of functions carried out by the organism including physiological functioning, social interaction, and interaction with the external environment. [Given this network of phenomena, how then does self concept function?]

I propose that self concept and the other classes of human functioning just implied are subject to a common central organizing principle: movement toward consist with enhancement of the survival, maintenance, and growth of the organism. The propositions following are offered for debate and empirical testing. They describe the functioning of self concept as consistent within a complex matrix of human functioning while the discussion makes special reference to self concept among adolescents and adults. The propositions are based on a synthesis and organization of theories and research which provide a preliminary base for testing their validity.

Proposition 1: The human organism is purposive; it functions in ways which support its own survival, maintenance, and growth. Given a multitude of external inputs, the organism constructs a matrix of perceived meanings which, within the matrix of events and realities perceived, supports the individual's survival and growth.

Conception of the human organism as purposive has been one among several theoretical positions on the psychological nature of man. Such pruposiveness is generally inferred from the functioning of the organism and not as an explicitly pursued outcome.

According to Heider (1958), it is "man's nature, as an expression of his search for greater perfection to find pleasure in the pleasure of a loved object..." (p. 214, emphasis mine). This nature was not presumed to be conscious, but rather the logical interpretation of the presumed relationship among human sentiments. Of the purposive quality of human life, Lecky (1945) comments, "We do not have to explain why the organism acts, but only why it acts in one way rather than another. . . . One source of motivation only, the necessity to maintain the unity of the system, must serve as the universal dynamic principle. Not conflict but unity must be the fundamental postulate." (p. 108). Of this purposiveness he writes, "the purpose which unified the behavior is not observable, but is a creative condensation of the observed behavior, an instrumentality which we employ in order to make the behavior intelligible to ourselves." (p. 69). He describes this single purpose as that of preserving one's integrity, and the maintenance of a unified organization, and takes the position that the purpose of an organism is evident only when behavior is viewed in its entirety as a unit (p. 68 and 80).

Purpose or function (variously identified as unity, balance, organization or growth) is also assumed among systems theorists. The search for unity, integration, or balance has been identified as a basic function of organisms by Lwoff (1966). A basic postulate Lock Land (1973) makes in his identification of a transformation principle in general systems theory is "that the behavior of all living things is growth directed activity," (p. 17). This growth motivation is directed in part from genetic encoding and in part from socio-cultural influences (p. 111). Further, he sees all learning as acquired within the constraints of the goal directedness of the organism (p. 135).

This first proposition is consistent with the sources reviewed above. A conception of the human organism which posits facilitation of well being (survival, maintenance, and growth) as a central organizing principle in human functioning is implicit in the content which follows.

Proposition 2: It is the nature of the human organism to seek concepts and meanings which evidence consistency across the diverse elements in a given segment of experience. Such input may include, among others, currently held concepts, personal objectives, rules of causality, and environmental constraints. Identification of consistent elements across these input facilitates acquisition of pragmatically valid concepts which are consistent with experience, a reasonable reflection of "objective" reality, and supports the growth and survival of the organism. Both conceptual schema and behavior may be broadly interpreted as a product of the consistency seeking process. As with other components of the individual's conceptual framework, self concept is also an outcome of such consistency scans of the way people order and learn a stimulus-rich world. Generalized consistency seeking rpocesses are fundamental to a mastery of the causal network of the environment, thereby providing a context for cognition, expectations, and actions. As concepts generated in this manner are pregmatically valid and consistent with experience, a minimal level of such consistency is essential as a basis for intentional action (Davies, 1968; Heider, 1958; Lecky, 1945; Rosenberg, 1968; Tannenbaum, 1968).

In his treatise on balance theory, an early version of consistency theory, Heider (1958) proposes two basic cognitive processes: unit formation and reaching a balanced state. Unit formation reflects identification of invariance across instances to identify a class of units while a balanced state implies a goodness of fit use of consistency processes. As both processes require consistency seeki cognitions to bring them into being this further suggests a primary role of consistency processes in human cognition.

Portions of the definition of consistency in common among contemporary cognitive consistency theorists, posits a tendency to behave in a way that maximizes

the internal consistency of one's cognitive system (Newcomb, 1968). There appear to be more than cognitive processes involved in arrival at consistency, however. Here are some proposed by consistency theorists. Rosenberg and Abelson (1960), propose that persons seem motivated by cognitive consistency needs primarily when these are consistent with minimizing loss and maximizing gain for them. In an extension of this position, Katz (1968) suggests that consistency principles extend to include broader functions such as motivation, the value system, and personality predispositions. In his analysis, Rosenberg (1968) argues that the need for consistency may often be subordinated to the need to think well of oneself and one's prospects. Kelman and Barron (1968) observe that inconsistency may serve as a signal for possible shortcomings in coping, while greater consistency is likely to be associated with a greater frequency of success, need achievement, and opportunities for new growth. Brehm and Cohen (1962) also note that satisfaction of important needs is more salient to motivation of behavior than the search for cognitive consistency alone. Thus, variables involved in consistency seeking include but do not appear to be limited to cognitive components: there are many potential response determinants (Abelson, 1968).

A review of the rich diversity of data related to consistency (Theories of Cognitive Consistency, 1968, is an excellent source) leads to two inferences: (1) there are varied components of consistency, varied ways of attaining it, and varied levels along which consistency may be attained, and (2) consistency issues appear to be relevant only when the purposive or goal directed aspects of the individual are involved. If the second inference is accurate, then consistency seeking may be a critical mechanism in service of optimizing personal functioning.

As the consistency seeking process is characteristic of concept formation generally, is it appropriate to assume that it is also characteristic of self concept formation? Several research studies support taking a cautious but positive position with respect to similarity in perception of self, others, and other

objects. Chodorkoff (1954) found that perception of self and environment are marked by similar degrees of adequacy or perceptual distortion within subjects; Rudin and Stangner (1958) demonstrated similarity in figure-ground perception for perception of both social and physical objects; and Burns (1976) found a high positive relationship between attitudes to self and attitudes toward others. On the cautious side of the argument, Abelson (1976) found that subjects recall different kinds of details depending on whether they are taking the perspective of self or observer, indicating that observations of self and others may have a somewhat different emphasis in content. This phenomenon was also described by Burn in an earlier symposium this week.

Proposition 3; The process of moving toward consistency is multi-faceted, and developmentally progressive. Self concept is a function of the meanings and consequences of past experiences, current experience originating in the external environment, and the internal cognitive processes used for selecting and making meaning from the matrix of data available. It also varies in degrees of organization and complexity and ranges along continua from fragmentary to cohesive, concrete to abstract, simple to complex, and specific to general. The fragmentary, concrete, simple, and specific ends of each continuum are most characteristic of the self concept of young children while their opposites are more characteristic of mature persons. With the passage of time, shifts along the continua reflect consistency based accomodations of an increasing body of diverse experiences. The individual must periodically review and reformulate consistency based solutions as new input is available and as needs and circumstances of the individual change.

Mead's description of the development of the self (Meltzer, 1967) is a convenient point of departure from which to discuss multiple facets and developmental characteristics of self concept formation. According to Mead, at the earliest states in life a child has only observation of others and imitation as a means to

derive information about him or her self. Thus the small child's self concept is likely to be highly consistent with a given experience in time, but highly fluid and changing across situations. Later, as the child moves to a role taking mode, self concept will reflect consistency with a given role, but continuity across roles or classes of situations may vary. (Note that a role offers a concept of a way to be.) Expectations for being a son or daughter, brother or sister, student, or friend may vary markedly across roles as might the various role expectations which are implicit for role categories such as male, female, worker, child, and adult. At this point in development the child has no unitary standpoint from which to view self.

Later, the child abstracts a generalized self. This later stage reflects a development of the consistency seeking process at a higher level of abstraction as the more general concept requires the individual to accept concepts of self which fit appropriate roles and experiences and reject those which seem less suitable. A more unified sense of self is under construction.

As the level of generality at which consistency issought shifts from one phase of development to another, the total organism encounters a wide variety of factors which may require accomodation. Among these may be social constraints as brought to bear by significant others such as teachers, peers, and parents; the pressure of the broader community and general expectations to produce one's own judgment of what one ought to be and what is good; the degree to which the meeting of specific needs is dependent on achievement of specific kinds and levels of performance; the need to be accepted by others; attributions of effort, ability, and effectiveness; and estimates of efficiency, potential, and expectations for future outcomes.

That self concept is indeed derived and maintained through interaction of man factors such as those listed above is demonstrated through research studies of sel esteem, an evaluative dimension of the self-concept. Coopersmith (1967) found tha

the family environment of boys with high as contrasted with low self-esteem were characterized by a matrix of influences including total or nearly total acceptance by parents, clearly defined and enforced limits, latitude for individual action and expression, less drastic forms of punishment, permission of open discussion and dissent, and vigorous, active, assertive behavior patterns.

In a study by Norem-Hebeisen (1977) teachers whose students made substantial increases in self esteem over a seven month period described their teaching and classroom management practices differently from teachers whose students showed loss or no change in esteem. (Self-esteem in this study is defined as an evaluative component of self concept.) The practices described include:

.communication of genuine caring and concern for the student

.sensitivity to the experience of the child in a given situation

.awareness of what is helpful and effective for individual children

.awareness of the impact of their own behavior on individual children

.rarely or never subjecting children to public reprisals or ridicule

.management of individual disciplinary problems with the individuals concerned rather than the whole class

.perception of the value and worth of the child while observing and dealing directly with behavior problems

.communication of genuine caring and concern for the student while negotiating for a change in behavior

.clearly defined guidelines for behavior in the classroom with consistent follow through on relevant behavior

.explicit, direct, supportive, and clearly articulated communication when giving class assignments, setting up and enforcing rule systems, explaining the functions ofdiscipline to the students, evaluating student performance, and describing and defining the student-teacher relationship.

all children complete their schoolwork

.structure of behavioral and instructional objectives in a way which places maximum accountability and self management with the student.

These variables reflect teacher skills in giving support, clear communication, behavior management, and instructional management. By implication, these classrooms were conducted in a way which made it possible for students to feel accepted and to be competent socially and academically. Their increased self-esteem was an attribution consistent with a network of variables in the classroom setting.

The previously cited description of Mead's outline of self concept development also provides one model of heirarchical development. It suggests qualitative changes in the organization of the "self" as the individual matures. Qualitative changes in conceptual thinking has been most explicitly detailed by Piaget (1958). Subsequent to Piaget, other researchers have investigated the nature of qualitative changes which accompany development. Loevinger (1976) has focused on ego, or character development in human personality and Kohlberg (1969) has focused on the development of moral reasoning. Common across all such cognitive developmental perspectives is the claim that the individual progresses along an invarient hierarchical sequence of qualitative changes. The changes reflect transformations characterized by shifts along continua from the simple to complex, specific to general, concrete to abstract, and fragmentary to cohesive.

Kapland and Crockett (1968) review cognitive consistency processes from a perspective of cognitive development. They propose that the modes of dealing with inconsistency differ systematically in a developmental sequence. More primitive modes of resolution are characterized by an exclusive single factor with no consideration of multiplicity of sources. In the intermediate modes the process moves to one other factor beyond those immediately involved to resol

the apparent incompatibility of elements. In advanced modes of resolution, explicit consideration is given to a multiplicity of factors. Kelman (1968) outlines a similar hierarchy in consistency processing. His model proposes movement from compartmentalization to restructuring the context in which the inconsistency occurs to transcendence through introduction of a superordinate principle. The models provided by Kaplan, Crockett, and Kelman parallel the cognitive developmental theories in the manner in which they outline qualitative changes in the cognitive processing of the available data.

Recent research within the domain of self concept indicates that self conceptualizing is also characterized by hierarchical cognitive structure. Alschuler et al. (1977) have measured the structural qualities of "knowledge of self". They propose four levels of self knowledge: elemental, situational, patterned, and transformational. In a replication of their original work, the stages correlate substantially with age ($r = .61$) and ego level ($r = .77$). Van den Daele (1968) has identified such a developmental organization in the description of ego ideal. Shifts in self descriptions on the "Who Am I?" measure are described by Montemayor and Eisen (1977) as characterized by increasing abstraction and a tendency for children and adolescents to describe areas of particular salience for their age group. Of particular relevance to the consistency hypothesis is the increased sense of unity with increasing age reflected in description by adolescents.

If subsequent research into developmental qualities of self concept development reinforces the observation of isomorphism across various dimensions of cognitive functioning a number of assertions may be strengthened. Many of these have special significance in that they also help to articulate the unique qualities of self-concept among adolescents and adults as contrasted to that of children

1. An ongoing task in self conceptualization is to integrate increasingly wider sets of information into a concept of self. At higher levels of development the self-concept will incorporate a broader data base.
2. Prior to developmental change, the perceived body of data about self will always be greater than is currently integrated into the self concept.
3. As development progresses, self-perceptions will become more differentiated, contain more sub-categories, and conditions under which a particular self attribution might be made.
4. As development progresses self concept will be more stable, anchored as a generalization across situations, and less vulnerable to change on the basis of single episodes.
5. As development progresses, measured self concept will reflect greater internal consistency. Where self concept of young children will be highly unstable, self concept of mature persons will have a high measure of consistency across self descriptions.
6. Self concept evolves through a recursive process involving acquisition of new data, matching the new data against current concepts, and revision of current concepts where this is required to support an integrated and realistic sense of self.
7. In earlier stages of development, data derived from external events will be the raw material from which self concept is constructed. As development progresses, internal points of reference, values, and personal perceptions will have an increasing salience in the formulation.
8. Self concept is one component of a total belief system about the nature of the world and people in it. As development progresses, concept of self, while nested within broader concepts of the nature of the world in general, will become increasingly explicit. This is evidenced in-

part in the late adolescent's search for the meaning in life. In the broader meaning lies the central organizers for sculpting one's own personal meaning.

Proposition 4: Specific content of the self concept is generated within the constraints of the consistency process, serving the purpose of maximizing gain and minimizing loss for the individual as a living system. Thus it is possible that an individual's need for an interpretable, predictable, or safe environment may supercede the possible advantages of construing a situation in a manner which enhances self concept. Psychological survival for some children, for example, may require that they relinguish a sense of competence in deference to needs of a parent or peer who is important in other ways to the child's well being.

On the face of it, it would appear that an enhanced self-concept would be in the service of broad organismic goals. Yet we clearly see people choosing patterns of behavior and making judgment of themselves which are critical or defacing. Why? Enhancement serves the organism only as long as it maximizes the probabilities of that organism fulfilling it's needs for survival, maintainence and growth. Well being of the total organism, not enhanced self concept is of higher priority for the individual. Carl Rogers (1952) cites the hypothetical case in which a child's need for a parents approval and support may cause the child to go against that which the child perceives as appropriate. In this situation, the child abdicates his or her own sense of judgment and sense of what is worthy. This act is an implicit rejection of one's own perception and is therefore denigrating to the self concept of personal adequacy. Two studies among adult populations demonstrate how individuals may take what appear to be self derrogating positions in order to serve broader objectives of the organism. The interpretations offered here go beyond those proposed in the reports of the studies and would require elaboration of the data collected to support them.

Ross, Bierbrauer, and Polly (1974) studied attribution of responsibility for success or failure in a contrived teaching situation. The subjects taking the teaching role gave more weight to teacher than to student variables in the case of student failure, and reversed this weighting in the case of student success. This effect was most marked for experienced teachers. As the experiment was designed to heighten the teacher's awareness of his or her role in influencing the student, the teacher could reasonably have attributed greater responsibility to self in both success and failure conditions. A self-enhancing alternative would be to credit the teacher for student success and credit the student for failure. There was one piece of presumably objective information which probably altered the configuration of meaning for the subjects. The student was identified as a "typical or average" student. Given a common task, the typical student might readily be expected to have success. Therefore success could logically be attributed to the student while failure was inconsistent with the description of the student. Thus the subjects in this study adopted judgments most consistent with their sense of objective reality and rejected alternatives which were more self enhancing.

Another example of a non-obvious balance was provided when Achenbach and Zigler (1963) obtained real-ideal self measures on a carefully matched sample of psychiatric patients and non psychiatric patients. The patients were also classified as high or low in social competence.

Surprisingly, psychiatric patients who by definition were evidencing low psychological coping skills reported no greater discrepancies than non-psychiatric patients. Persons of high social competence in both patient groups reported a greater discrepancy between real and ideal while those of low competence reported greater real-ideal self congruence. Yet congruence might be considered to be inconsistent with low competence and high competence inconsistent with greater real-ideal self discrepancy. Where then is consistency?

The authors suggest that a high real-ideal discrepancy reflects introjection of social standards characteristic of high socially competent and mature persons. Among persons of different levels of social competence, the real-ideal discrepancies were inconsistent with their current life status, but consistent with broader social scripts which are likely to be foundational to both their functioning social competence and the degree to which they hold high standards for themselves. The balance between their self evaluation and actual life competencies is maintained by the socializing history which provided the superordinate goal structure. I submit that the introjection of high or low social standards and practices is the element which provides consistency to an otherwise apparently discrepant relationship between life status and self-evaluation.

Implication of the Broad Model

Self concept and achievement. The broad theoretical construct just outlined is a framework from which to view the outcomes of research on the relationship between academic achievemen and self concept. Both children and adults have been subjects in studies which seem to indicate that self concept functions in a causal role (Miller et al., 1973; Shrauger and Rosenberg, 1970; Wattenberg & Clifford, 1962) while another cluster of studies point to achievement as an antecedent to changed self concept (Bandura et al., 1977; Koocher, 1971; Calsyn & Kenny, 1977). The multivariate, interactive concept of human cognition and behavior as outlined in this paper would predict that in these studies the antecedent variable which inputs new self concept or new behavior introduces inconsistency in the current conceptual or behavioral matrix. Thus behavior which is inconsistent with the self concept is a potential stimulant to change while self concept shifts which are inconsistent with current patterns of behavior is a potential stimulant to behavioral change.

The nature of self concept. What is the most likely network of relationships among self concept variables, given this framework? Seven possibilities occur to me:

1. Self concept is not the product of a simple sum of experiences. With advancing development, self concept reflects increasing consistency within an organized network of relationships.
2. The development of self concept changes is reflected in the breadth of the context and in the quality of the organization reflecting increasing abstraction, generalizability, and complexity.
3. Self concept is one variable among several which serve to influence behavior and preferences.
4. There is likely a reciprocal feedback network between concept of the world-at-large and self concept and capacity to perceive, respond to, and integrate complex concepts and data matrices.
5. The concepts held by an individual at any point in time will be a product of past learning experiences and affective and cognitive processing.
6. The consistency of the self concept will be challenged whenever an event occurs which increases possibility of an outcome which does not fit with the constraints of the present self concept.
7. In situations which are perceived to threaten or denigrate the concept of worth of the individual, choices will be made which maximize gains or minimize losses first to the total organismic balance, and second to the self concept.

Consistency theory. The respective cognitive consistency theories (see Theories of Cognitive Consistency: a Sourcebook, 1968) coalesce to a common frame when viewed within a broader systems framework. These propose simultaneous multiple variable processing toward attributions consistent with the

perceived well being of the total system. Each consistency theory appears to offer but one more perspective of the same broad phenomenon. Each may include different antecedent conditions, goal structures, and social and environmental constraints, but the broad process toward systemic consistency appears common to all of them.

The tendency toward consistency is a mega-trait extending across multiple modalities and multiple categories of situations which elicit cognition and behavior. The tendency toward consistency will be manifest across a more multifaceted reality than appears at first glance. Thus, it is irrational to seek to promote one balance mechanism to the discredit of another, or to debate among enhancement, ego centrality, and dissonance reduction models as mutually exclusive. It is highly probable that all models are relevant, given an appropriate universe of antecedent conditions which may elicit them.

The configurations of a more broadly defined consistency process may clarify as we study the functional implications of consistency. Closer study of modes used to reduce inconsistency may clarify the relevant cognitive processes and maturation patterns.

Research methodology. The conceptual forebearers of this model are general systems theory, cognitive consistency theory and cognitive developmental theory, while much of the self concept literature reviewed was gleaned from the field of social psychology. Although the current body of research provides much data which converges with the model presented, aspects which relate to broader descriptions of relationships among variables and the organization of self concept over time need to be investigated. Descriptive studies which outline the broad relationships across multiple data sources and multiple processes are needed. The developmental nature of self-concept needs greater description as does the nature of the consistency seeking process.

Recent calls to the profession for research and data processing methods which better take into account the multifaceted, interactive qualities of the

human system have been made by Kenneth Gergen (1976), Urie Bronfenbreener (1977), and, Fred Kerlinger (1977). The model outlined here is one vehicle through which such studies may be initiated.

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